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Suffolk South Conference of Congregational Churches

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A Brief Historical Sketch

Prepared by
REV. EUGENE C. WEBSTER

Read at the Seventy-ninth Semi-annual Session, Walnut Avenue Church, Roxbury, Massachusetts, October 17, 1900

Suffolk South Conference of Congregational Churches

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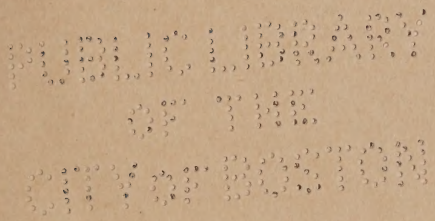


Read at the Seventy-ninth Semi-annual Session, Walnut Avenue Church, Roxbury, Massachusetts, October 17, 1900

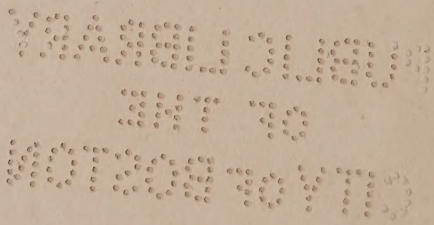
Rev. Eugene C. Webster,

Nov. 21, 1900.

THIS Historical Sketch of the Suffolk South Conference, an organization of certain Congregational Churches in Boston, Massachusetts, and its immediate vicinity, was originally written for presentation at the regular autumnal meeting of the Conference. When read it brought to the minds, especially of the older members of the Conference, early associations and pleasant reminiscenses. By a unanimous vote, it was ordered to be printed, and it appeared in the "Dorchester Beacon" just as it was delivered, which accounts for the form in which it is now published, although it has been somewhat augmented and rearranged.

E. C. W.

NEPONSET, MASS., November 5, 1900.



A Brief Historical Sketch

of the

Suffolk South Conference of Congregational Churches

1861-1900

ALTHOUGH the first public meeting of the Suffolk South Conference was held in October, 1861, the first preliminary meeting called to effect its organization was convened in October, 1860. At about the same time the churches to the north of Boston met and organized the Suffolk North Conference. Preliminary meetings for the formation of both of these conferences were, however, held together. Up to 1860 the churches of Boston and a part of the suburbs were not united in the fellowship of conferences, although for many years in the first half of the century they had held semi-annual conferences. The ministers of these churches, however, had been for many years organized into associations, which associations exist to this day. The Suffolk North Association of Ministers was organized in 1822, the Suffolk South association in 1829. The pastor of the Second church, Dorchester, belonged for a long time to the Norfolk association, which was organized in 1811.

Some of the conferences in Massachusetts were organized in those early years. The Brookfield conference is the oldest, having been started in 1821. Others that were organized in the twenties are the Barnstable, Essex North, Essex South, Middlesex South, Norfolk, Worcester North and Worcester South. Although our Suffolk county churches were not organized as they are today into conferences, nevertheless, they convened in conference assembled as early as 1826, for in that year the Suffolk conference was called by a committee of the Suffolk Association of Ministers "for the purpose of special and united prayer for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and the revival of religion and for the cultivation of Christian acquaintance." The churches that composed that early conference were those in Newton, Dedham, So. Dedham (Norwood), Charlestown, Medford, Waltham, the Green Street church, Evangelical church, So. Boston, Hanover Street, Old South and Park Street. Lyman Beecher was the moderator. The exercises adopted at this meeting were followed at any rate until 1839, after which year I could find no records. Each of the all-day meetings began with brief statements of the state of religion in the churches, a committee of three having been appointed to make notes of these reports, which committee reported at the afternoon session. Another committee arranged the program for the afternoon exercises, which for a long time was as follows: Prayer, minutes of the morning meeting, report of committee on state of religion, prayer, hymn, communion service, address, prayer and benediction.

A prominent feature of those early conferences was the appointment of delegates to attend all other neighboring conferences, which delegates reported at the next meeting of their own conference.

Each conference stood for something and usually uttered itself in some general resolution. Those days were not so very different from these in which we are now

living. Temperance resolutions had the same ring in them, only they were aimed in different directions. At the second meeting, for instance, they voted "that the conference recommend to the pastors and delegates that they direct the attention of the churches to the duty of abstaining from the use of intoxicating liquors."

They had the same difficulties that modern conferences have of meeting their own expenses. At a conference held in the Park Street church, a motion was carried to the effect that a collection be taken to defray conference expenses, and the balance should be devoted to the Massachusetts Missionary society. Two or three years later it was voted to assess the churches one dollar each for conference expenses, but at the next meeting that vote was rescinded and it was decided to defray incidental expenses from the contributions taken in the afternoon for feeble churches; just as some churches now pay their expenses out of moneys given for poor and needy members.

At a meeting in May, 1828, Dr. Blagden, then of Brighton, and afterwards of the Old South, was made moderator, and the Sabbath question was up for discussion, and it was voted "that we deem the sacred observance of the Christian Sabbath essential to the prosperity of religion and to the preservation of our social and civil institutions." It was also voted "that we view with alarm and grief the numerous violations of the Sabbath and that we especially disapprove of any unnecessary instances of travelling on that day by professors of religion; that we deem it the sacred duty of all professors of religion to unite their efforts in rescuing the Sabbath from profanation, especially by diffusing correct principles upon the subject and by the influence of a corresponding example."

At the fall conference in 1828, it was resolved "that it is recommended that special efforts be made by the pastors and delegates to induce the members of the congregations and especially of the churches to spend a portion of each day in reading the Scriptures and in prayer for their own salvation and that of others."

Religion seemed to be at low ebb in the closing days of the twenties, and the Suffolk conference called a day of fasting, humiliation and prayer to be observed on Dec. 31, 1829, and during the first part of the next decade many resolutions were passed seeking to encourage the home churches to more prayer and a deeper consecration. In May, 1832, delegates from the Union church went to the conference, asking its advice "relative to the expediency of excommunicating a member of that church for avowed belief in the doctrine of universal salvation." Unfortunately for our curiosity, no record is shown as to the action of the conference in the matter.

At the Salem church in October, 1832, Rev. Dr. Edwards moved "that the traffic in ardent spirit as a drink is, in our view, contrary to the spirit and requirements of the Christian religion, tends strongly to prevent the efficacy of the Gospel, and ought to be abandoned by all persons and especially by all members of Christian churches."

At about this time, it was reported at the meeting of the state association that there were 80 Congregational churches in Massachusetts that did not have a member engaged in the manufacture or sale of intoxicating liquors.

We have heard a great deal about the good old days, and undoubtedly if we were to call upon Brother Fay, whom I see here, he could tell us of many good things about these days that most of us do not remember so well. But they had their temperance problems and the Sabbath question to cope with. And they were also perplexed with another great trouble, as shown by the conference topic in 1833, "What way can be devised to remedy the present evil existing in our churches in respect to church members moving from their own churches into other towns and not taking their church connection with them." Two years later on the conference passed a resolution "encouraging persons moving from one church to another to take their letters."

At the fall conference in 1833 it was resolved "that we need greatly a spirit of humble, prayerful activity which, relying on the influences of the Holy Spirit, shall immediately strive that the work of God be revived, especially because the churches cannot remain in the state in which they are and of late have been

without incurring great guilt and falling yet farther backward into darkness and hardness of heart."

Now after these years of depression and low state of spiritual life in the churches, encouragement comes. In 1834 the conference expresses gratitude for "increased success and influence of the temperance reformation, the growing spirituality of our churches and the encouraging additions which they have received." And as a final reference to these early days, I will quote from the record of the conference held at Newton in 1836. "Resolved, that in the view of this conference the present interesting state of things in some of our churches and the many indications that a day of great blessing may be at hand, it is the special duty of the churches to avoid all collision of feeling amongst themselves on subjects not directly connected with the conversion of souls, to cultivate a spirit of Christian forbearance and fraternal affection, and to fix their attention and their hearts intensely on the great work of building up the Kingdom of God amongst us."

These good days many of you will recognize as forerunners of the historic revival of 1842.

Of the further sessions of that conference I have no knowledge, as no records are preserved where I can find them. It is the opinion of Rev. Dr. Henry J. Patrick that its meetings were given up, and that in 1860 the conference as we now have it was organized entirely anew. The "Boston Recorder," which was the forerunner of the "Congregationalist," reports that in 1839 the conference voted to hold annual meetings in each spring, instead of semi-annual meetings; but no record even of annual meetings is found after that of the first one held in Cambridgeport in 1840. Rev. J. W. Wellman, D. D., now of Malden, says that the meetings of the conference died out on account of the slavery question.

Forty years ago this fall, a call was issued by the Essex Street church (now the Union church) for a conference of churches, and it was addressed to the churches within the limits of the Suffolk North and South associations. The letter-missive was signed by the pastor, Rev. Nehemiah Adams, and his deacons, and read as follows: "In consequence of a desire which we believe exists among us for more fraternal intercourse as churches, and learning that many of our pastors have, for several months past, had frequent conversations on the subject, it has been suggested to us that if one of the churches in Boston should, on its own responsibility, invite the churches in the neighborhood to meet with it for prayer and conference, and to deliberate as to any further plan for stated or occasional meetings of the same kind, it would meet with a cordial response."

The second preliminary meeting was held with the Central church, Rev. John E. Todd, pastor, on Winter street, on Feb. 13, 1861. This meeting was called for the "purposes of social prayer in view of our common needs, deepening of our love, and increasing our zeal for our common Lord, and strengthening of our mutual interest and affection as members of a common family, partakers of a common experience and heirs of a common hope."

At this meeting a committee of four, including Drs. Blagden and Adams, was appointed to address the churches connected with the Suffolk North and South associations and send them a copy of the following vote, viz.: "That it is desirable for the Trinitarian Congregational churches of this city and the adjacent towns to unite in a conference, which shall meet, by pastors and delegates appointed by the churches, semi-annually, in the months of April and November, or at such other times as the conference may appoint, for the purpose of prayer and consultation with reference to our greater union and efficiency in advancing the kingdom of our common Lord."

The meeting called by this committee was held April 17, in the Old South chapel on Spring Lane, and it was decided to organize two conferences within the limits of the North and South associations. The same committee then issued a call for two conferences of churches, one called the Suffolk North, to meet in the Old South chapel, and the other, the Suffolk South, in the Central church on Winter street. These conferences were held on May 16, 1861.

At this meeting a committee was appointed to draw up a constitution and to report at an adjourned meeting which was held a week later. Rev. A. C. Thompson was made moderator of this

provisional meeting. Thus on the 23d of May, 1861, the Suffolk South conference was permanently formed, and the first public meeting was held in October of the same year.

This meeting was held in Newton and Dr. Stone was the moderator. The sessions were held in the morning and afternoon, and included a report on the religious condition of the churches, a discussion of previously appointed topics, and the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

The churches originally in the Suffolk South Conference were the following: in Boston, Park Street, Essex Street (now the Union), Berkeley Street, Central, Shawmut and Springfield Street; in South Boston, Phillips and E Street; Brighton; Brookline, Harvard; Dedham, South (now the Norwood church); in Newton, Center, West, Eliot, and Auburndale; in Roxbury, Eliot and Vine Street; in Watertown, the Phillips church; in West Roxbury, the South Evangelical, and the Mather church (now the Central) at Jamaica Plain.

The pastors of these churches in 1861 were: Rev. Andrew L. Stone, D. D., Rev. Nehemiah Adams, Rev. Henry M. Dexter, Rev. John E. Todd, Rev. Edwin B. Webb, Rev. John L. Graves, Rev. Edmund K. Alden, Rev. Charles S. Porter, Rev. Richard G. Greene, Rev. J. Lewis Diman, Rev. Moses M. Colburn, Rev. Daniel L. Furber, Rev. Henry J. Patrick, Rev. Joshua W. Wellman, Rev. Sewall Harding, Rev. Augustus C. Thompson, Rev. J. Oliver Means, Rev. Thomas Laurie, Rev. T. T. Munger, and Rev. Stephen R. Dennen.

The constitution has not been materially changed since it was first adopted. Other churches have been added to the conference and in 1873 the Suffolk West conference separated from the Suffolk South.

The Dedham church joined our conference in 1863; the North church at Newton, the Cottage Street church in Dorchester, and the Waverly church joined in 1867. The Newtonville church came in in 1868, and in 1869 the Boston Highlands church and the church at Grantville. In 1870 the Neponset church, Dorchester Second and the Hyde Park churches were received into the conference. A year later the Walnut Avenue church and Village church were admitted, and in 1872 and '73 the Newton Highlands church and the Holland church in Boston Highlands were received. Later on and in the order named, the following churches have been admitted to membership in the conference: the Olivet church in Boston (1876), Wollaston church in Quincy (1877), Boylston church, Jamaica Plain (1879), Clarendon Hills, Hyde Park (1880), the Islington church in Westwood (1881), East Walpole (1881), Memorial church at Atlantic (1885), Canton (1888), Harvard, and Central churches, Dorchester (1888), Roslindale (1891), Garrison Memorial (now St. Mark's) (1896), and the Park and Downs Union church in Norfolk Downs, Quincy (1897).

The first recording secretary was Rev. Richard G. Greene, pastor of the Brighton church. Upon his removal from the state, Rev. Henry J. Patrick, of West Newton, was made secretary in October, 1862, and he served until October, 1873, at which time the conference was divided and Dr. Patrick went with the Suffolk West conference. He had served the conference for 11 years, or 23 sessions, and he had not missed a meeting. Other secretaries have been Dr. A. E. Dunning, Dr. Geo. M. Boynton, Rev. Ellis Mendell, Dr. Addison P. Foster, Rev. C. C. Kellogg, Dr. Wm. H. Allbright, Rev. F. W. Merrick and the present scribe, Rev. Eugene C. Webster.

Only six men have served as treasurers. Deacon Henry Hill held the office from 1861 to 1864, and Mr. F. A. Benson followed him until 1870. Deacon J. R. Bradford was treasurer until 1876 and Arthur W. Tufts became the treasurer. He served the conference for 12 years from 1876 to 1888, and was followed by Mr. Timothy Smith, who continued in office until Deacon E. S. Hathaway, of Hyde Park, assumed the duties in 1891.

In 1876 a new office was created, that of Sunday school statistical secretary. The incumbent of this office was to gather all items of interest connected with the Sunday schools of the conference and to present a report once each year. Deacon Elbridge Torrey was the first Sunday school statistical secretary. Others have been Nathaniel Green, M. D., Dea. Charles W. Hill, John C. Proctor, Rev. J. W. Ballantine, William Shaw, Rev. G. W. Brooks, Rev. E. A. Robinson, and Rev. Eugene C. Webster.

No one was ever known to seek this office, rarely did one serve more than one term, and nearly every incumbent has sought to resign long before his term expired. Two years ago, the duties of the Sunday school statistical secretary were merged in those of the statistical secretary.

The statistical secretaries, who report all the facts about the churches that are called for by the "Year Book," have been Rev. John O. Means, 1861-64; Rev. Henry J. Patrick, 1864-73; Rev. Joseph B. Clark, 1874-79; Rev. Charles M. Southgate, 1879-83; Rev. Edward N. Packard, 1883-86; Rev. Solomon P. Fay, 1886-89; Rev. William R. Campbell, 1889-92; Rev. Ellis Mendell, 1892-95; Rev. William H. Bolster, 1895-98, and Harry G. Dixon, the present incumbent.

As for the churches themselves, some of them have changed their locations, a few of them have been disbanded, and in 1873, on account of the size of the conference, several of the churches withdrew and formed the Suffolk West conference.

The churches now composing the Suffolk South conference are the Union, Olivet and St. Mark's in Boston; the Phillips in South Boston; the six Congregational churches in Dorchester; four churches in Roxbury; West Roxbury; two in Jamaica Plain; Roslindale; Canton; Dedham; Hyde Park; Norwood; East Walpole; three churches in Quincy, and one at Westwood,—twenty-eight churches.

The Springfield Street church had ceased to exist as a Congregational church, therefore, it was dropped from the conference in 1870. The Vine Street church became the Immanuel church in 1877.

During these years, the churches of the conference have been served by pastors who have come and gone. Among them will be remembered Rev. Daniel Tenney, of the Springfield Street church; Rev. Thomas Laurie, of West Roxbury; Rev. Jonathan Edwards, of Dedham; Rev. A. H. Carrier, at Auburndale; Rev. F. B. Perkins, Jamaica Plain; Rev. C. C. Carpenter, Brookline; Rev. Calvin Cutler, Auburndale; Rev. W. B. Wright, Berkeley street; Rev. J. B. Clark, Newtonville; Rev. C. L. Mills, Highland church; Rev. A. E. Dunning, Highland church; Dr. Edward Strong, West Roxbury; Rev. F. A. Warfield, Union church; R. R. Meredith, Nehemiah Boynton, Union church; Rev. C. M. Southgate, Dedham; Rev. L. H. Blake, Immanuel; Rev. H. A. Shorey, Pilgrim; Rev. F. E. Clark, South Boston; Rev. E. N. Packard, Second Dorchester; Rev. G. M. Boynton, Jamaica Plain; Rev. C. A. Beckwith, West Roxbury; Rev. Michael Burnham, Immanuel; Rev. W. G. Schoppe, Neponset; Rev. D. T. Torrey, Harvard church, Dorchester; Rev. W. H. Bolster, Harvard church; Rev. John E. Tuttle, Jamaica Plain; Rev. Addison P. Foster, Immanuel; Rev. A. H. Johnson, Clarendon Hills; Rev. E. A. Robinson, Wollaston; Rev. W. H. G. Temple, South Boston; Rev. A. W. Archibald, Hyde Park; Rev. R. B. Grover, Roslindale. Some names may be inadvertently omitted from this list. Ministers who have served our churches and still meet with us are not included in this record. It would be pleasing to remind ourselves of the active and influential laymen who have materially and spiritually built up these churches, but who have gone forth into other fields of activity or entered their heavenly home, and I will mention only a few of them. A delegate to the very first meeting of the conference was Dea. Samuel Wilkins, of the Shawmut church, who kept up his interest in the conference until the division in 1873, when he went to the Suffolk West. Bro. Jeremiah Myers and Dea. Daniel Grover were frequently delegates from the Neponset church. Jonathan A. Lane, of the Union church. Bro. Linus Child, of the Shawmut church, was the first layman to act as moderator. This was at the 11th semi-annual session. The next layman chosen moderator was Dea. R. H. Stearns at the 22d meeting. Dea. J. R. Bradford and Dea. E. Torrey succeeded him in the two following conferences. Hon. J. F. C. Hyde was moderator in October, 1877, Samuel B. Capen in October, 1880, and April, 1884. Another well remembered delegate to the conference was Dea. J. C. Sharpe, of the Second church. He was moderator in October, 1881. Many of you will remember Thomas Bicknell, of Dorchester, and Hiram Orcutt. This very brief list must not omit the name of Charles W. Hill, who was so deeply interested and for so many years in this conference. Other names that occur frequently in the early records are Dea-

con Jeremy Drake, Hon. Joseph S. Roper, Henry Hill, Artemas Wiswall, Calvin Guild, E. P. Burgess, E. L. Tead, Moses H. Day, Daniel W. Job, and W. W. Whitcomb. We will refer to but one more lay member of this conference, one who served as moderator at the conference held in Pilgrim church six years ago last April, whose name is recorded among the death notices in today's papers, Dea. John E. Tuttle, of Neponset, who passed away quite suddenly night before last, and who had been appointed a delegate to this conference.

During the forty years, the character of the topics discussed by the conference has not greatly changed. The first meeting considered, "What are the best methods of calling the entire church into the active service of Christ?" It is exceedingly interesting to read the topics and note who presented them for all these years. The recording secretary holds in his possession a book into which have been secured every program and much other printed matter of value. An historical sketch would not be complete without some extended reference to these topics; but in the interest of brevity, they must be classified. Several conferences considered topics that had to do with deepening the religious life. Public worship and topics treating all phases of revival work were frequently brought before the conference. The religious education of children in the home, in the church and in the Sunday school has not been neglected during any period of the forty years. Many questions concerning the personal and individual responsibility of the members of the churches were brought up. Other topics have been on the work of the Holy Ghost, salvation, preaching, prayer, pastor and people, benevolence, good citizenship, church covenants, temperance, Sabbath, creeds and church membership, Bible in conversion, worldliness, public schools, Christian Endeavor society, and the prayer meeting.

Walnut Avenue church has entertained the conference three times before this, viz., in October, 1876, April, 1884, and April, 1890, twice before this part of the edifice was built, and the last time soon after it was dedicated. The first time we met here the topic for conference was "The Relation of the Sunday school to the prevalence of practical righteousness"; and at the last meeting here, the conference discussed "The teaching quality in Sabbath school teachers," and today, without comparing these records, our subject deals with the Sunday schools again.

Twenty-four years ago today, the scribe records that "the day was beautiful within and without. The church was completely filled at both sessions."

According to the latest report, there are in the twenty-eight churches in the conference 7,756 members. Four hundred fifty-eight persons were received into the churches last year upon confession of faith and by letter, and 373 were removed by death, letter and otherwise. In connection with these churches there are 2,596 in the Young People's Society of Christian Endeavor and 10,090 in the Sunday schools. These churches contributed $12,149 for foreign missions, $3,616 for educational work, $1,024 for church building, $15,256 for home missions, $3,981 for work done by the American Missionary association, $1,017 for the Sunday School and Publishing society, $237 for ministerial aid, and $5,462 for other benevolences, a total of $42,742, that being an increase of $3,187 over the previous year. The home expenditures last year were $114,843, which was $9,373 less than the previous year. Two of the churches have no houses of worship. The total value of the church edifices is $955,975. Five churches own parsonages, the total value of which is $36,500. The ministers of the conference receive $55,325.

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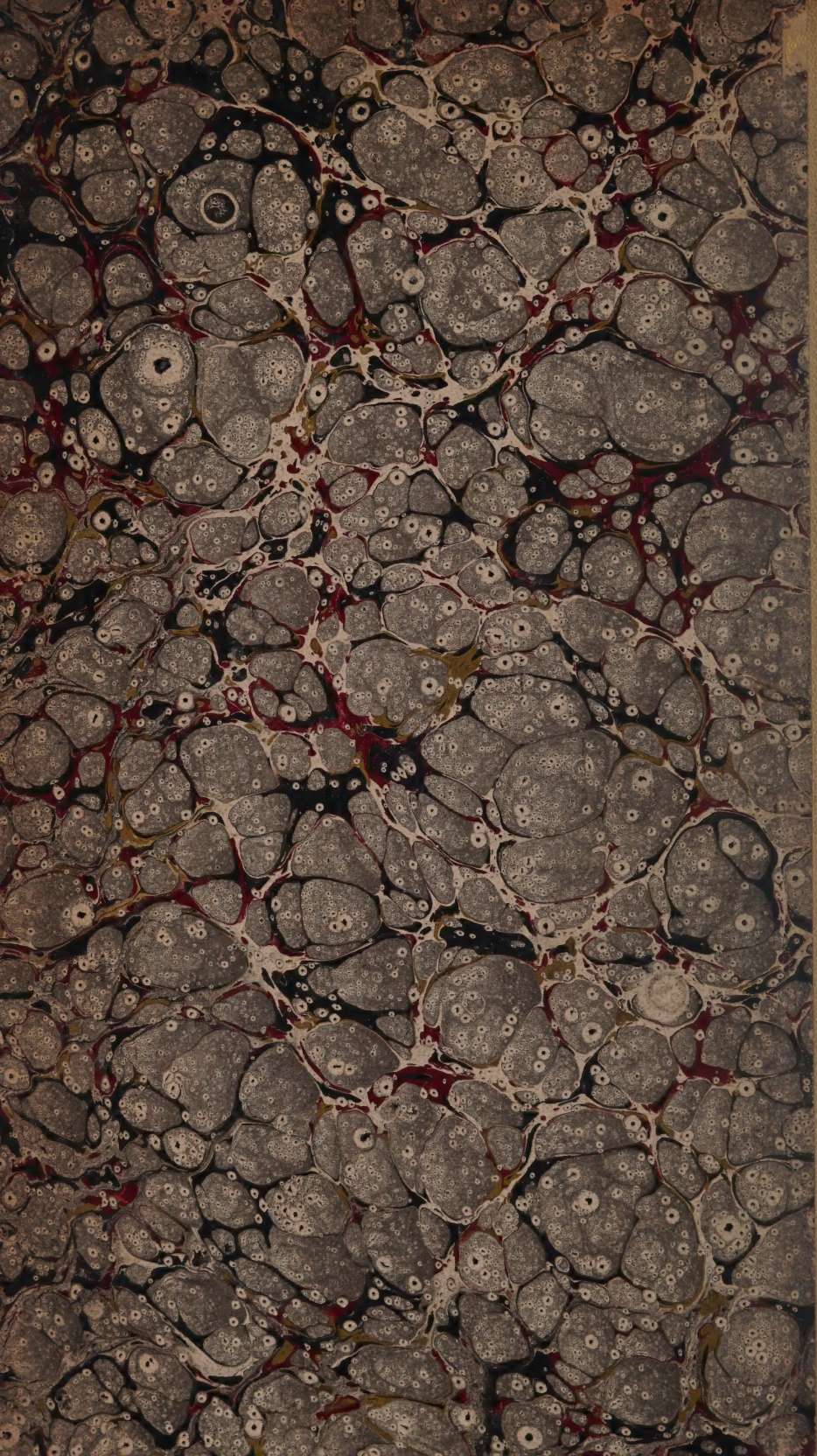
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